

The Epistle of James as a Witness to Broader Patterns of Jewish Exegetical Discourse*

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Introduction

The authorship, addressees, and setting of the New Testament Epistle of James remain disputed. In church tradition, the dominant position is held by the attribution of the Letter to James, Jesus' brother (or cousin)—the person mentioned in Matt 13:55–57 and Mark 6:3–4 (absent from the Lukan parallel in 4:16–30). It deserves notice that in both Matthew and Mark these occurrences are preceded with an indication of tension within the family.¹

In recent research, arguments both for and against the traditional attribution have been advanced, and the jury is still out on this point.² The setting of the epistle constitutes a separate topic, distinct from that of any

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¹ Matt 12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; cf. Luke 8:19–21. Cf. Gal 1:19, where James is called the Lord's brother; and Acts 12:2–17; 15; and 21, where he is portrayed as the key figure in the Jerusalem community. See also Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.197–203, who reports on James's execution at the instigation of the high priest in the year 62 (cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.3–4). See R. Bauckham, “For What Offense Was James Put to Death,” in *James the Just and Christian Origins* (ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans; *NovTSup* 98; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 199–232; and C. A. Evans, “Jesus and James: Martyrs of the Temple,” in Chilton and Evans, *James the Just*, 233–49. Other persons bearing this name are also mentioned in the New Testament, among them one of Jesus' important disciples, James son of Zebedee (brother of John—Matt 10:3).

² For a review of scholarly opinions, see M. Myllykoski, “James the Just in History and Tradition: Perspectives of Past and Present Scholarship (Part 1),” *Currents in Biblical Research* 5/1 (2006): 73–122.

specific link to the historical person of James, or lack thereof. Yet here again the matter is far from settled. While some scholars believe that the letter originated in an early Jewish-Christian milieu in the Land of Israel,³ others speak in terms of a later Diaspora provenance.⁴ The addressees are clearly people of the Diaspora,⁵ but the makeup of the intended audience remains a debated issue, with suggestions ranging from entirely Gentile Christian, to a mixed community, to one composed predominantly of Jewish Jesus-followers.

It is intriguing that the same data have been interpreted as pointing in opposite directions. The opening line's appeal "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (Jas 1:1);⁶ the total lack of reference to the issue of Gentile membership or of the applicability to them of the ritual demands of the Torah (themes so prominent in Paul's writings and in the foundational report in Acts

³ See, for example, P. H. Davids, "Palestinian Traditions in the Epistle of James," in Chilton and Evans, *James the Just*, 33–57, who analyzes, inter alia, linguistic evidence and occupational imagery. See also D. L. Bartlett, "The Epistle of James as a Jewish-Christian Document," *Society of Biblical Literature 1979 Seminar Papers* (ed. P. J. Achtemeier; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 2:173–86.

⁴ Cited as possible indications are: the late first explicit reference to the letter (by Origen; it is not mentioned by Tertullian and is absent from the Muratorian Fragment); the fact that canonicity remained disputed even in the course of the fourth century (though accepted, with reservations, by Eusebius, it would be later doubted, for example, by Theodore of Mopsuestia); its reasonably good Greek style; the lack of references to the temple; and indications of a knowledge of Paul's writings from the late 50s. These features, however, are far from providing conclusive proof and are, moreover, open to alternative interpretations. See the discussion in Davids, "Palestinian Traditions"; J. Kloppenborg, "Diaspora Discourse: The Construction of *Ethos* in James," *NTS* 53 (2007): 242–70.

⁵ As parallels in genre (i.e., epistles sent to the Diaspora from the Land of Israel), one may invoke 2 Maccabees, the Letter of Jeremiah and the letter at the end of the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch*. See Davids, "Palestinian Traditions."

⁶ Cf. *War Scroll* 1:1–2; Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; Rev 7:2–8; 21:12. See also Acts 1–2, which ascribes importance to filling the "number" of twelve apostles, as eschatological representatives of the twelve tribes; and correspondingly, the description of the foundational event of the Jesus movement in Acts 2:5–11 as the eschatological ingathering of the dispersions of Israel. See S. Pines, "Notes on the Twelve Tribes in Qumran, Early Christianity, and Jewish Tradition," in *Messiah and Christos: Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity* (ed. I. Gruenwald, S. Shaked, and G. G. Stroumsa; TSAJ 32; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1992), 151–54; cf. J. Taylor, "The List of the Nations in Acts 2:9–11," *RB* 106/3 (1999): 408–20. If the expression "the twelve tribes" generally signals scenarios of eschatological judgment, its use in James is particularly interesting in view of the very low-key eschatology that characterizes the rest of the epistle.

15); the lack of any references to the temple or of any “distinctively Christian” concepts—all these features have been interpreted as either reflecting the earliest stage in the development of Christianity, characterized by a traditionally Jewish pattern of messianic belief (and perhaps politely including Gentile fellow travelers in the community), or, alternatively, as reflecting a much later stage, when the “hot” issues, including those pertaining to the Jewish–Gentile conundrum and that of Jesus’ status, have already been settled. This later stage is seen as characterized by a full-blown “supersessionist” tendency that had by then won the day, so that, for example, the “twelve tribes” appellation might now incontrovertibly signify the Gentile church.⁷

The main message of the epistle—namely, that faith should be expressed in deeds—has likewise been interpreted in various ways: either as a pointed response to Pauline positions and thus as an expression of an intra-Christian dispute⁸ or, alternatively, as a less specific development within broader Jewish thought of themes originating in wisdom literature.⁹ According to David

⁷ For an overview of existing opinions, see Myllykoski, “James the Just in History and Tradition”; Bartlett, “The Epistle of James.” See also M. Konradt, *Christliche Existenz nach dem Jakobusbrief: eine Studie zu seiner soteriologischen und ethischen Konzeption* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

⁸ See Bartlett, “The Epistle of James,” 173, 175, 178–79. See also P. J. Hartin, “Call to Be Perfect Through Suffering (James 1,2–4): The Concept of Perfection in the Epistle of James and the Sermon on the Mount,” *Biblica* 77/4 (1996): 477–92, who discerns in the epistle clear signs of literary dependence on the existing written Gospel traditions, e.g., the Sermon on the Mount. See also idem, *James and the Q Sayings of Jesus* (JSNTSup 47; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991). But compare R. Bauckham, “James and Jesus,” in *The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission* (ed. B. Chilton and J. Neusner; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 100–137, who sees James’s relation to the tradition of the sayings of Jesus in terms of “creative appropriation and re-expression.”

⁹ Davids, “Palestinian Traditions,” shows—in opposition to the suggestion of late dating and intra-Christian discourse—that despite some similarities, the epistle is not dependent on any written form of the gospel tradition. Moreover, the piety/poverty material in James echoes to some extent themes in Qumran literature and *1 Enoch* (mediated through the Jesus tradition), while material on wisdom, tongue, and speech echoes Proverbs and Ben Sira. See also Hartin, “Call to Be Perfect.” It is worthy of note that, unlike similar passages in James (e.g., 1:5), the parallels in the Sermon on the Mount do not attest to any emphasis on wisdom. Wisdom language is replaced there by a call to follow God’s example: God is merciful—you should be merciful. The Dead Sea Scrolls bear witness to the notion that the “impossible demands” become feasible thanks to the predestined election of the sons of light and the gift of the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., 1QS 11,

Bartlett, a mixture of (general) Jewish and (particular) Jewish-Christian materials may be discerned in the epistle; in other words, general Jewish patterns are informed and colored here by an intra-Christian polemic.¹⁰ In his recent study, John Kloppenborg went so far as to suggest that the epistle was addressed to a general Diaspora Jewish community to which Jewish Christians still belonged; he believes that the intention of the author was to strengthen the position of the Christian minority as an integral part of that community—that is, as sharing that broader community’s religious concerns and patterns of discourse.¹¹ In her recent study, Maren Niehoff sides instead with the perception of the letter as reflecting an intra-Christian *problematique*.¹²

This essay is a further attempt to revisit this conundrum via the discussion of some strategies of biblical exegesis characteristic of James—an avenue underrepresented in the existing research. I believe that this exegetical angle may be especially useful for probing the possibility of the epistle as a witness to contemporaneous Jewish discourse. I will attempt to determine whether the strategies of interpretation represented in the epistle reflect exclusively intra-Christian concerns or also broader tendencies of hermeneutics; and, in the latter case, whether they bear witness to Hellenistic, or alternatively to Palestinian Jewish, patterns of exegetical discourse. There is a certain overlap in the data discussed in my investigation and in that of Niehoff, but our conclusions concerning the setting of the epistle often differ. These differences, however, are secondary to my discussion which strives to demonstrate that sometimes, even when the precise *Sitz im Leben* of an exegetical motif employed by the epistle remains unclear, this motif can still be used in reconstructing the larger picture of ancient Jewish Bible exegesis.

As test cases I have chosen two motifs that are featured prominently in Jas 1 and 2: (1) *Nomos* (Torah) as a “perfect royal law of freedom”; and (2) Abraham as an outstanding example of a righteous man whose *faith* is expressed in the *deed* of the Akedah. I will touch on relevant exegetical patterns attested in Second Temple Jewish writings, but the bulk of the evidence will come from the

1QH 4). We may have here different developments of a shared underlying topic, which together bear witness to that common background.

¹⁰ See Bartlett, “The Epistle of James.”

¹¹ J. Kloppenborg, “Diaspora Discourse.”

¹² See M. R. Niehoff, “The Implied Audience of the Letter of James,” *New Approaches to the Study of Biblical Interpretation in Judaism of the Second Temple Period and in Early Christianity* (ed. G. A. Anderson, R. A. Clements, and D. Satran; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 57–77. Niehoff’s article has further references to suggestions recently raised with regard to the setting of the epistle.

Palestinian Jewish traditions found in rabbinic sources. The later provenance of these sources constitutes an obvious problem when they are invoked as possible “background” to New Testament materials.¹³ In light of this difficulty, it is the opposite track—namely, the study of the Epistle of James as a possible early witness for certain Jewish tendencies further developed in later rabbinic Judaism—that may hold promise.

Torah as the Perfect Royal Law of Freedom

“All the Torah” in the “Love Your Neighbor” Precept

The opening section of James is characterized by highly charged descriptions of God’s law as the “perfect law of liberty” (1:25: νόμος τέλειος τῆς ἐλευτερίας; 2:12: νόμου . . . ἐλευτερίας), and the “royal law” (2:8: νόμος βασιλικός).¹⁴ The latter passage further advises the reader: “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well.”¹⁵ Naturally, these praises of the law as God’s kingly gift and the ultimate expression of human freedom invite comparison with Paul’s diatribe against “false brethren . . . who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:4), freedom that Paul contrasts to the (ritual) demands of the Jewish law (Gal 2:15–21). It should be noted that Paul’s argument here is addressed to a Gentile audience, a fact that might definitely have influenced his rhetoric.¹⁶ Whatever the case, we will tackle the question whether one should necessarily see in Jas 1:25 and 2:12 pointed polemic with Pauline-type views further on; but first, the possible general Jewish setting of James’s statements needs to be addressed.

The focus on Lev 19:18 (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”) as the representative pillar of the divine law is well attested in Jewish tradition from Second Temple times on. Thus we read in *Jubilees* 36:4–8:

And among yourselves, my sons, be loving of your brothers as a man loves himself, with each man seeking for his brother what is good for him, and acting together on earth, and loving each other as themselves. . . . Remember, my sons, the LORD, the God of Abraham, your father. . . . And now I will make you

¹³ On this problem with regard to discussion of the Epistle of James, see Niehoff, “The Implied Audience,” 61–64.

¹⁴ If not otherwise stated, English translations of biblical and New Testament passages are from the Revised Standard Version.

¹⁵ See also Jas 2:1–7, where an interpretation of Lev 19:18 seems to be elaborated.

¹⁶ See J. G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 77–100.

swear by the great oath¹⁷ . . . (that) each will love his brother
with compassion.¹⁸

It has been argued that this focus reflects a core religious metamorphosis characteristic of the thought of the Jewish sages of that period—the appearance of what David Flusser called “a new sensitivity in Judaism.”¹⁹ It can be shown that this emphasis on Lev 19:18 was internalized in multiple Jewish milieus, including that of Qumran. Yet in the latter case, the love command received an idiosyncratic interpretation that restricted the loving attitude to the members of the elect community, whereas an attitude of hatred/enmity was prescribed toward outsiders (the “sons of darkness”).²⁰ One should note that Philo identifies the core principle regulating interpersonal human relations not with Lev 19:18 but rather with the second part of the Decalogue; the first part, in contrast, represents the core principle (“head”) for the Torah commandments that treat a person’s relations with God.²¹ The focus on Lev 19:18, then, may have represented a hermeneutical tendency within Palestinian Jewry.

It is in later rabbinic sources, as well as in the Gospels (Matt 22:34–40; cf. Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:25–28), that the clear identification of the command to love one’s neighbor as the foundational principle of the entire Torah is found. In a Tannaitic midrash, *Sifra Qedoshim* 2:4 (cf. *Gen. R.* 24), this idea is ascribed to R. Akiva; whereas, according to the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sabb.* 31a), Hillel

¹⁷ A clear reference to the ending of Lev 19:18 (“I am the Lord!”).

¹⁸ The English translation follows that of O. S. Wintermute in *OTP* 1:124.

¹⁹ See D. Flusser, “A New Sensitivity in Judaism and the Christian Message,” in idem, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1988), 469–89. It seems significant that in the passage from *Jubilees* the love command is programmatically linked to Abraham, the founding father of Israel as a religious entity.

²⁰ See S. Ruzer, “From ‘Love Your Neighbor’ to ‘Love your Enemy,’” in idem, *Mapping the New Testament: Early Christian Writings as a Witness for Jewish Biblical Interpretation* (Jewish and Christian Perspectives 13; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 35–70; idem, “The Double Love Precept: Between Pharisees, Jesus, and Qumran Covenanters,” in idem, *Mapping the New Testament*, 71–100.

²¹ See Philo, *Spec.* 2.63. Cf. G. E. Sterling, “Was There a Common Ethic in Second Temple Judaism?” in *Sapiential Perspectives: Wisdom Literature in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 20–22 May, 2001* (STDJ 51; ed. J. J. Collins, G. E. Sterling, and R. A. Clements; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 171–94, where he highlights the centrality of Lev 19 in general (but not specifically Lev 19:18!) for a variety of patterns of Jewish ethical instruction attested in both Hellenistic Diaspora sources and the Qumran scrolls.

had made a similar claim even earlier.²² It should be emphasized that in these instances Lev 19:18 is not presented as detached from the other Torah regulations; quite the opposite, it is perceived as the Great Rule (הכלל הגדול) from which these regulations are derived. Possible differences in the perception of the range of those “secondary obligations” notwithstanding, the same basic idea may be discerned in the verses immediately following the programmatic statement in Jas 2:8 and, as it seems, elaborating on it (Jas 2:8–11):

If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well. (9) But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (10) For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. (11) For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” said also, “Do not kill.” If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law.

In my opinion, the above evidence on the Lev 19:18-centered patterns of exegesis in early Jewish sources indicates that (a) in Jas 1:25 and 2:8, *νόμος* stands for the Torah of Moses; and (b) the saying in Jas 2:8, far from reflecting a peculiar Christian development, is but one more witness to the broader Jewish exegetical tendency starting, as noted, in the time of the Second Temple and continuing well into the rabbinic period.²³ The alternative conclusion—much less probable in light of the Second Temple period evidence—would be that the notion of Lev 19:18 as the sum total of the Torah was first developed in the early Christian context and later reinvented or picked up by some rabbinic authorities, who ascribed it to Hillel and Akiva. Niehoff seems to prefer the latter model, based on the fact that no late Second Temple Jewish sources—that is, outside the New Testament—contain a perfect overlap with Jas 2:8’s exegetical elaboration on Lev 19:18.²⁴ In my opinion, however, it is not necessary to find an

²² It has been convincingly argued that Hillel’s negatively formulated version of the Torah’s foundational principle (Golden Rule) represents, in fact, within the Jewish discourse an ancient interpretation of Lev 19:18. See D. Flusser, *Jesus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 86–89.

²³ But cf. J. H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1916/1961), 198, according to whom *νόμος* here means “the law of God as known to the reader through the Christian interpretation.”

²⁴ See Niehoff, “Implied Audience,” 69–73 and n.61.

overlap between various exegetical elaborations and establish their common Jewish setting, but rather to see their shared backdrop topic. In this case, I would search—possibly under the influence of certain philosophical trends in the Roman-Hellenistic world—for a concise set of principles that represents the whole Torah, with Lev 19:18 as a strong, but not only, candidate.²⁵ The fact that Jas 2:8 contains no indication that positing Lev 19:18 as the “great commandment” is derived from the Jesus-centered Messianic outlook further supports the suggestion to view it as a witness for the aforementioned broader Jewish exegetical pattern.

The same argument for a general Jewish backdrop may be made with regard to Gal 5:14 (cf. Rom 13:8–10): “For the whole Torah (law) is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” It should be noted that no polemic can be discerned between Jas 2:8 and the ideas expressed in these Pauline passages. Moreover, neither in James nor in Paul is the appeal to this seemingly widely accepted exegetical pattern made for the sake of a polemic with the “formative” Jewish tradition. It is, rather, the expression of an intrinsic link to that tradition; once established, this link is further used to promote the author’s particular agenda, which only in Paul’s case is a Christ-centered one.

Since the explicit emphasis on Lev 19:18 as the core principle of the Torah is also attested in the Gospels (emphatically so in Matthew), one may alternatively claim that the formulation in Jas 2:8—and then also in the Pauline letters—is primarily derived from the Jesus tradition. Yet neither James nor Paul presents the tradition as going back to Jesus, and at least Paul is known to have been sensitive to this issue and keen on differentiating between revealed truths, truths transmitted by a tradition, and truths attained through his own contemplation.²⁶ It also deserves notice that in a characteristic instance of Matt 19:16–22, where Lev 19:18 seems to be referred to as a sum total of (Decalogue) commandments, Jesus’ words are presented as reflecting broader understanding.

In addition to Lev 19:18, references to Deut 6:4–5 may also be discerned in James (Jas 2:5, 19; 4:12),²⁷ and pairing of these two “love commands” is undeniably a salient feature of the Jesus tradition (see Matt 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:25–28). Yet the passage from Deuteronomy constitutes arguably one of the core references in the Jewish religious discourse; furthermore, as I have shown elsewhere on the basis of a Qumranic parallel, the

²⁵ See Ruzer, “The Double Love Precept,” 71–72.

²⁶ See, for example, 1 Cor 7; Gal 1.

²⁷ For discussion, see D. H. Edgar, “The Use of the Love-Command and the *Shema* in the Epistle of James,” *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 23 (2003): 9–22.

exegetical coupling of Deut 6:4–5 and Lev 19:18 also had wide currency in late Second Temple Judaism—a tendency of which the Synoptic pericope mentioned above is but one example.²⁸ One should also pay attention to the fact that the Gospel tradition itself presents Jesus’ ruling on the double love precept as coinciding with general (Pharisaic) opinion.²⁹ Moreover, Matthew’s statement to the effect that the whole of the Torah and all the prophets are dependent on the core principles of Lev 19:18 and Deut 6:5 seems to be part of his general tendency to present Jesus’ teaching as being in accordance with the authoritative (Pharisaic) patterns of Jewish religious discourse.³⁰ Thus, such a coupling is not in itself sufficient to establish a specific link with the Synoptic material—the more so as a clear two-pronged exegetical pattern, explicitly combining Lev 19:18 with Deut 6:5 as the twin core principles of the Torah, is conspicuously absent in James (the same applies to Gal 5:14 and Rom 13:8–10). I suggest, therefore, that what we are witnessing here is, rather, a linkage with the general topic of Jewish exegetical discourse outlined above.³¹

The Perfect Royal Torah

Having established that in James the νόμος stands for the Torah of Moses, epitomized—in accordance with a contemporary Jewish tradition—in the love-your-neighbor command, let us return to the description of this command as the “perfect royal law of freedom/liberty” (Jas 1:25; 2:8). It should be noted at the outset that neither “perfect” (τέλειος) nor “royal” (βασιλικός) is to be found in

²⁸ Thus, according to my reading, a similar coupling is also attested in the *Community Rule* 1. See discussion in Ruzer, “The Double Love Precept,” 90–94.

²⁹ See Ruzer, “The Double Love Precept,” 75.

³⁰ On the problematic closeness of Matthew’s community to the Pharisees, see, for example, A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian–Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 83, where he suggests, with regard to another Matthean pericope (5:31–32), that “Matthew . . . has modified it to make it better suit his Jewish–Christian concerns, casting it in terms of [the] Hillel–Shammai dispute.”

³¹ But see T. W. Leahy (“The Epistle of James,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* [ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy; Herndon, Va.: Chapman, 1997], 912), who insists that James is here “alluding to the command of love of neighbor (Lev 19:18) cited in Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom (Matt 22:39). By fulfilling the command of love of neighbor one fulfills the whole law. This was made explicit in Rom 13:8–10; Gal 5:14.” Cf. Edgar (“The Use of the Love-Command,” 11–12, 16–20), who believes that the reference to both Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18 in James indicates specific proximity to the synoptic tradition.

Paul's descriptions of the law. As a matter of fact, "royal" is totally absent from both the Gospels and the vocabulary of the authentic Pauline letters, whereas "perfect" does appear in the epistles but in a different context. Thus, the will of God in Rom 12:2, and the future prophetic revelation in 1 Cor 13:10, are both called perfect. Alternatively, in 1 Cor 2:6 and 14:20, "perfect" designates believers of mature religious stature who carry out God's will.³² It is in this latter sense that τέλειος is invoked in the Gospel tradition—namely, in Matthew (5:48; 19:21); a similar, even if not identical, notion is also attested at Qumran (1QS 1:8; 3:9; 5:24; 11:2).³³ There is no explicit link between any of these usages of τέλειος and that attested in Jas 1:25, and thus no particular reason to see in the τέλειος and βασιλικός wording of the James passage an indication of an intra-Christian discourse—polemical or otherwise.

An investigation of James's possible points of reference in a broader Jewish tradition is therefore justified. In James, "perfect" and "royal/kingly" seem to be *eternal* attributes of the Torah; the author of the epistle makes no attempt whatsoever to link these terms to an eschatological, Messiah-centered understanding of the divine law. The best analogy to the use of "perfect" in James, in fact, is Ps 19:8, which describes the Torah as "perfect" (תמימה) and, in its perfection, as "reviving the soul" (משיבה נפש).³⁴ Even if this characterization of the Torah in James expresses a polemical stance vis-à-vis claims for the Torah's dramatically new meaning/interpretation for the end of the ages, there is no indication that the polemic is directed specifically against Paul (see 2 Cor 3)—claims of this kind had a much broader circulation, as attested, for example, in *1QPesher Habakkuk* 2 and 7, and *Damascus Document* 6 (4Q266 ii–iii; 4Q267 2; 4Q269 iv; 4Q270 ii).³⁵

In the Hebrew Bible, God is perceived as the Eternal King of the Universe; such expressions as "King of the world/eternity" (מלך העולם) or "King of the kings" (מלך [מלכי] המלכים), routinely used in Jewish liturgy from early

³² Cf. Eph 4:13; Phil 3:15.

³³ See also 1QS 2:1–4; 9:2–19; 10:21–23; 1Q28a 1:17; 1Q28b 1:2.

³⁴ This verse, as well as its later midrashic elaborations, could be a starting point for further investigation of this term in James, but such an investigation is beyond the scope of the present study.

³⁵ See the discussion in S. Ruzer, "The New Covenant, the Reinterpretation of Scripture, and Collective Messiahship," in idem, *Mapping the New Testament*, 215–38, esp. 220–29. Cf. the "conservative" stance, inclusive of the traditional understanding of the Torah, ascribed to James, the leader of the Jerusalem community in Acts 15, 21.

times, testify to the centrality of such a perception.³⁶ It can thus be suggested that the predominance of this pattern of thought makes the use of “royal” language with regard to God’s Torah in Jas 1:25 and 2:8 completely logical. Or, as proposed by Leahy: “Since the Mosaic law comes from God, the universal king, it is rightly called royal.”³⁷ But should this usage be seen as originating with the author of the epistle? The appearance of this appellation in James is clearly tailored to providing ammunition against lapses—whether connected to Pauline-type ideas or not—in fulfilling certain Torah commandments. This is the author’s peculiar polemical agenda; the epistle, however, gives no indication that the “royal” designation is derived from the author’s own innovative thinking; it is used in an offhand manner, without any further attempt at explanation or clarification. This in itself may indicate that the author is referring to an existing exegetical tradition, a tradition in which the kingly character of the Torah has already been made explicit and elaborated upon. Is there corroborating external evidence for such a tradition?

As noted, God is routinely called “king” in biblical and post-biblical Jewish sources.³⁸ Yet, in addition to this general tendency, a relatively late tractate, *Soferim*, perceives God as king specifically in connection with the giving of the Torah to Israel.³⁹ Even if the appearance of the motif here is clearly linked to the tractate’s main issue—that is, the rules for writing a Torah scroll—it seems to reflect an older motif of rabbinic elaboration. Thus, for example, this issue is addressed in *m. Ber.* 2:2, where the recitation of the *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel”) prayer is discussed:

R. Joshua b. Korhah said: why was the section of “Hear” (Deut 6:4–9 starting with “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one”) placed (in recitation) before that of “And if you

³⁶ For the former idea, see, for example, Exodus 15:18 and *Mekhilta de-R. Ishmael* ad loc. (ed. S. Horowitz and I. A. Rabin; Frankfurt: Kauffmann, 1928–1931), 150–51. For rabbinic evidence on liturgical usage of the expression “מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,” see *Soferim* 13:7–8; 14:1–2, 7; 20:1; *b. Shabb.* 137b; *b. Meg.* 21b; *b. Menah.* 42b. For early evidence for the use of the latter expression, see *m. Avot* 3:1; 4:22; *t. Sanh.* 8:9.

³⁷ See Leahy, “The Epistle of James,” 912. For a completely different appraisal, see B. Reicke (*The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude* [AB 37; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964], 29), who interprets “kingly” as indicating that the law is the law of Christ (*sic!*), who is “superior to the Roman emperor.”

³⁸ See *Königsherrschaft Gottes und himmlischer Kult im Judentum, Urchristentum und in der hellenistischen Welt* (ed. M. Hengel and A. M. Schwemer; Tübingen: Mohr, 1991).

³⁹ *Soferim* 13:6–7. The composition is usually dated to the period of the *geonim*.

will obey my commandments” (Deut 11:13–17)? So that one should first accept upon himself [the yoke of]⁴⁰ the kingdom of heaven (עול מלכות שמים) and then take upon himself the yoke of the commandments (עול מצות).

Using the term “kingdom of heaven,” a characteristically rabbinic substitute for the “kingdom of God”—a tendency of which the Matthean usage is usually seen as an early proto-rabbinic example⁴¹—the Mishnah claims that the acceptance of/belief in God as the only true king should undergird (precede) Torah observance, with the common term “yoke” appearing or, at least, presupposed in both cases further highlighting the link between the two.

This very motif of Torah’s precepts as reflecting God’s kingdom is invoked, albeit in an indirect fashion, in *m. Avot* 3:5, the early Tannaitic provenance of which has been lately contested by some scholars.⁴² Through the use of the term “yoke,” appearing here twice in some manuscripts, the acceptance of the Torah’s demands/kingdom is counterposed to the rule of the worldly kingdom/authorities:⁴³

R. Nehunia b. Hakannah said: whoever takes upon himself the yoke of the Torah (עול התורה), the yoke of the [imperial, secular] kingdom (עול מלכות) is removed from him, as well as the yoke of everyday concerns/earning a living (עול דרך ארץ). But whoever breaks off from himself the yoke of the Torah, the yoke of the [imperial, secular] kingdom is placed upon him, as well as the yoke of everyday concerns.⁴⁴

Finally, another Tannaitic source not only combines the motifs found in the above passages from *m. Berakhot* and *m. Avot* but also links them to the core principle of the religiously sanctioned behavior outlined in Lev 19:18:

⁴⁰ So in the Napoli edition, absent in Ms. Kaufman.

⁴¹ See D. Bivin, “Jesus and the Oral Torah: The Unutterable Name of God,” *Jerusalem Perspective* 5 (1988): 1–2; R. Lindsey, “The Kingdom of God: God’s Power among Believers,” *Jerusalem Perspective* 24 (1990): 6.

⁴² See discussion in G. Stemberber, “*Mischna Avot. Frühe Weisheitsschrift, pharisäisches Erbe oder spätrabbinische Bildung?*” *ZNW* 96 (2005), 243–258.

⁴³ Cf. Rom 13:1–7.

⁴⁴ English translations of rabbinic material are my own unless otherwise specified.

“If they were wise, they would understand this, [they would discern their latter end!]” (Deut 32:29) If Israel kept the words of the Torah given to them, no people or kingdom would rule over them. . . . If they only paid attention to what their father Jacob told them: Take upon you [the yoke of] the Kingdom of heaven and emulate one another in the fear of God and practice kindness to one another.⁴⁵

Two observations are pertinent here: (1) In the rabbinic discussions the kingly status of the Torah is intrinsically connected to the notion of the kingdom of God/heaven, understood as the “existential space” of a person who has accepted God as his only ruler; the demands of God’s Torah are therefore absolutely obligatory.⁴⁶ (2) It is not only Lev 19:18 but also, and maybe even more prominently, Deut 6:4 (faith in one God) that provide the exegetical foundation for the elaboration of the topic.

In fact, the link between God’s dominion (“Hear, O Israel”) and the obligation to fulfill the commandments is already hinted at in the biblical passage immediately preceding Deut 6:4, which presents the necessary connection between “hearing” and “doing”: “Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them; that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut 6:3, cf. Exod 24:7). The idea is further developed, albeit in a slightly different form, in early rabbinic sources.⁴⁷

Addressing what he perceives as lapses in the observance of important Torah precepts derived from Lev 19:18, James seems to be fully aware of the exegetical connection between the notion of the kingly Torah and the “Hear, O Israel” proclamation in Deut 6:4, which he strives to properly reestablish. This is indicated by the fact that his reasoning is put forward in the same terms of the crucial link between “hearing” and “doing” or, alternatively, between the faith in one God and following his precepts:⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Sifre Deut.*, 323.

⁴⁶ For an illuminating comparison with Jesus’ notion of the kingdom, see D. Flusser, “The Kingdom of Heaven,” in *idem*, *Jesus*, 104–12.

⁴⁷ See, for example, *m. Avot* 1:17.

⁴⁸ Unlike Rom 1:17, Gal 3:11, and Heb 10:38, the author of James does not employ the verse from Hab 2:4 (“He who through faith is righteous will live” or “The righteous will live thanks to his faith”). See discussion below.

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. . . . But some one will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you shallow man, that faith apart from works is barren? (Jas 1:22; 2:18–20)

The lapses the epistle is explicitly reacting to are those of negligence—under the pretence of faith in God’s help—in keeping one’s commitment to the well-being of one’s fellow believer (Jas 2:14–17). Generally speaking, the author’s criticism might have had something to do with Pauline-type ideas undermining, as it were, the emphasis on concrete religious obligations derived from the Torah; but there are no specific indications of that. And, of course, one would not find in Paul’s writings anything like encouragement of the abovementioned negligence.

Whatever the particular setting of the discourse, James’s strategy is to emphasize the link between one’s professed belief in one God and one’s readiness to fulfill the Torah’s precepts; and in this, as we have seen, he anticipates the topical patterns of later rabbinic discussions. It is highly unlikely—as unlikely as in the case of his presentation of Lev 19:18 as the sum total of the Torah—that James was the first to discuss the topic, with later sages following his lead (or reinventing it independently). In light of the absence of the “royal” appellation for the Torah in the Gospel tradition—given all its extensive use of the kingdom of God/heaven language—it is also not probable that James here addresses intra-Christian concerns. It seems much more plausible that the epistle responds to, and thus bears witness to, an existing broader exegetical pattern, of which more fully developed offshoots are found later in rabbinic literature. One may suggest that the topical affinity between James’s noteworthy use of the “royal”/“kingly” appellation with regard to the Torah and the notion of accepting the “yoke” of God’s kingdom and that of the commandments, reflected in rabbinic traditions, turns the epistle into an early witness for this exegetical pattern.

Admittedly, there are in James similarities to the Jesus tradition reflected in the Sermon on the Mount, even if the “royal Torah” motif is not among them. The insistence that “hearing” is not enough, that there is a need to fulfill God’s will, characteristic of Matt 7:21–24, is usually mentioned in this context. It has also been observed that the *Shema* retains its centrality for

Matthew, as it does for James.⁴⁹ However, in my opinion this is not enough to establish a general connection between the Sermon and James, let alone literary dependence. It should be emphasized that the exegetical frameworks differ substantially—the notion of Jesus as a messianic intermediary revealing the ultimate interpretation of God’s Torah, central to Matt 5–7, is completely absent from James’s argumentation. There is thus no particular reason to see James as proceeding—as Matthew seems to have done—vis-à-vis and reacting to an “original” version of the Sermon.⁵⁰ It is more probable that in James here we rather have a reference to a common topic of early exegetical discourse (adopted by Matthew also), promoting the proto-rabbinic insistence on the importance of practical—not hypocritical or “external”—expression of one’s faith.⁵¹

Torah as the Law of Freedom

The presentation of the Torah as the law of freedom is arguably the most conspicuous motif in the first part of the epistle (Jas 1:25; 2:12). The notion of freedom (ἐλευθερία, *libertas*) was an important one in the Greco-Roman world, and the Jewish Hellenistic philosopher Philo wrote an entire treatise expounding that *Every Good Man Is Free*.⁵² However, clear evidence for perceiving the Torah as the law of freedom is lacking in Philo, whereas it is indicated in some rabbinic sources. Thus in *m. Avot* 3:5, quoted above, R. Nehunia b. Hakannah claims that a person who is ready to accept the yoke of the Torah is *freed* from enslavement both to political authorities and to the necessities of a mundane existence.

⁴⁹ See B. Gerhardsson, *The Shema in the New Testament* (Lund: Novapress, 1996).

⁵⁰ As against the evaluation suggested in P. Sigal, “The Halakhah of James,” *Intergerini Parietis Septum* (Eph. 2:14): *Essays Presented to Markus Barth on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. D. Y. Hadidian; PTMS 33; Pittsburgh, Pa.: Pickwick, 1981), 338–39.

⁵¹ The intrinsic link between faith in one God and the commandment to love God “with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul and with all one’s might” is explicitly established in the *Shema* (Deut 6:4–5); this link was not overlooked by rabbinic tradition. See, e.g., *m. Ber.* 9:5, where the link is developed in the direction of trials and even martyrdom: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. With all your heart—with both of your inclinations, with the good inclination and with the evil inclination. With all your soul—even if he should take your soul (life). With all your might—with all your wealth. Another reading, with all your might—with every measure that he has measured for you, be exceedingly grateful to him.”

⁵² Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber sit* (Philo [tr. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker; 10 vols.; LCL; London: Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929–1962], 9:11–111).

This passage can be seen as one of the key corroborations of the Jewish tradition's internalization of the concept of freedom, as reconstructed by Shlomo Pines.⁵³ According to his analysis, the notion of freedom as a supreme religious value was foreign to ancient biblical tradition, and it took hold in Jewish thought only later—namely, under the influence of Greco-Roman culture. Jews, however, lacked both real-life experience of (political) freedom and earlier religious reflection on such experience. In consequence, the cultural emphasis on freedom as a fundamental and highly cherished human value was transformed into the aspiration for liberation. So, in *m. Avot's* terms, emancipation from enslavement is clearly presented as an objective to strive for, though the Mishnah presupposes that even now there may be individuals who, having liberated themselves from earthly yokes, are, so to speak, living in the kingdom of God.⁵⁴ This same motif is partially invoked again in *Num. Rab.* 19:26, this time with explicit reference to the freedom acquired via the Torah:

And another reason why it (the Torah) was given in the wilderness is this: As the wilderness is neither sown nor tilled, so if one accepts the yoke of the Torah (עול התורה) he is relieved of the yoke of everyday concerns/earning a living; and as the wilderness does not yield any taxes from crops, so (Torah) scholars are free men in this world (כך בני תורה בני חורין).

Another rabbinic tradition, found in the last chapter of tractate *Avot* (generally considered to be a later addition), strives to provide this idea with a proper midrashic backing (*m. Avot* 6:2):

Baraitha: R. Joshua b. Levi said: Every day a *bath qol* (heavenly voice) goes from Mount Horeb, and thus proclaims: “Woe unto men on account of [their] contempt towards the Torah, for whoever occupies himself not with the [study] of Torah is called ‘[the] rebuked [one]’” . . . and it says, “and the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables” (Exod 32:16). Read not *haruth* (חרות, which means “graven”) but *heruth* (חרות, which means

⁵³ See S. Pines, “על גלגולים של המונח חירות” [On the Metamorphoses of the Notion of Freedom], *Iyyun* 33 (1984): 247–65.

⁵⁴ See discussion in Flusser, *Jesus*, 106–107, 110.

“freedom”). For there is no free man for you, but he that occupies himself with the study of the Torah; and whoever regularly occupies himself with the study of the Torah, lo, he is exalted.⁵⁵

One may say that a somewhat desperate, though undoubtedly resourceful, attempt to “uncover” freedom in the Decalogue core of the Torah aptly illustrates two important remarks made by Pines concerning (1) the desire of late antique Jewish tradition to “domesticate” the notion of freedom, and (2) the absence of clear precedents in the biblical sources. The issue of the exact nature of the freedom given by the Torah (freedom from what or whom?) addressed in the Mishnah is revisited—with a twist—in an early Amoraic midrash (*Lev. Rab.* 18:3):

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Eliezer the Galilean: When Israel stood at Mount Sinai and said, “All that the Lord had spoken will we do and obey” (Exod 24:7), the Holy One, blessed be He, called the angel of death and said to him: “Even though I made you a universal ruler over earthly creatures, you have nothing to do with this nation. Why?—Because they are My children”—as it is written, “You are the children of the Lord, your God” (Deut 14:1). . . . The same is [indicated in] the verse, “And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven (*haruth*) upon the tables” (Exod 32:16). Read not *haruth* (graven) but *heruth* (freedom). R. Judah and R. Nehemiah and the rabbis [differed on the point]. R. Judah said: freedom from the angel of death; R. Nehemiah said: freedom from [hostile] governments; the rabbis said: freedom from sufferings.

Thus, in addition to the routine “hostile authorities,” liberation from suffering and ultimately death is also posited here. The passage from *Leviticus Rabbah*, then, marks a collation of motifs attested elsewhere in rabbinic literature; exegetically reading “freedom” into the description of the Decalogue covenant found in Exod 32:16 and elaborating on the nature of the emancipation achieved through succumbing to the rule of the Torah, which in turn is presented as the ultimate liberator. The link between the outlook reflected in *m. Avot* 3:5 and that

⁵⁵ Cf. *Kallah Rabbati* 5:3.

of *Lev. Rab.* 18:3 becomes even more explicit if one supposes that both suffering and death could have been perceived by the propagators of the tradition as core aspects of mundane existence.⁵⁶

Unlike later rabbinic sources, James presents no explicit midrashic elaboration of the Torah of freedom motif; this idea, presupposing the high value placed on freedom, is invoked here as an existing and established concept in no need of polemical defense. The situation thus differs considerably from Paul's rhetoric in Gal 2:4. Paul's attitude toward the νόμος is notoriously complicated and cannot be adequately discussed here. Suffice it to say that his evaluations of the Torah of Moses—either positive or negative—seem to undergo change, depending on the nature of the intended audience.⁵⁷ The specific meanings ascribed to νόμος may also vary correspondingly: in addition to (and in differentiation from) the Torah of Moses, in Paul's writings νόμος may also stand for a limited set of ritual observances distinguishing Jews from non-Jews.

Seemingly, it is in this latter sense that νόμος is counterposed to freedom in Galatians 2. The apostle insists that the Gentile fellow-travelers of the Jesus movement are free from the "works of the law," most pointedly from the need to undergo circumcision. Whatever place and importance should be ascribed to the passage within the overall picture of Paul's religious outlook, in terms of his rhetorical strategy here, freedom is intrinsically linked to overcoming submission to the law. It is this thought pattern, combined with the above evidence from *m. Avot*, that informed Pines's psychologically tinged explanation of the apostle's stance. According to Pines, in fact Paul was a party to a general Jewish tendency to emphasize the need for liberation from the various mundane-existence-related "yokes" by means of total submission to the rule of Torah. Only, he did not stop there; he took the task of self-liberation one step further—namely, he called for liberation from enslavement to those (ritual) Torah regulations that were conditioned by the worldly setting.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ See discussion on *m. Avot* 3:5 above. Cf. Rom 5:14; 8:21–22.

⁵⁷ See Gager, *Reinventing Paul*.

⁵⁸ See Pines, "על גלגולים" [Metamorphoses]. For the association of the Torah's ritual regulations with the constraints of mundane existence—namely, being "in body" and belonging to society—see Philo, *Migr. Abr.* 89–93. Philo's operative conclusions, however, differ from those of Paul. For a recent discussion of Paul's attitude toward the Torah's "external" regulations, see S. Ruzer, "Paul's Stance on the Torah Revisited: Gentile Addressees and the Jewish Setting," in *Paul's Jewish Matrix* (ed. T. G. Casey and J. Taylor; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), 75–97.

In light of such an understanding of Paul's thinking here, it is only natural that James's definition of the Torah as the law of freedom has been interpreted as the polemical reverse of Paul's stance. There are, however, strong arguments against such an interpretation: (1) as noted, the Torah of freedom theme is invoked in James as an existing and established one in no need of polemical defense; (2) the commandments that James insists it is necessary to fulfill under the law of freedom have nothing to do with the ritual observance that according to Paul one should be liberated from in order to move from law to freedom.⁵⁹

These arguments are admittedly not decisive. In principle, it is possible that the epistle is reacting to a somewhat different variation of the motif attested in Galatians—a variation expressing either Paul's own thought or that of certain "Paulinists."⁶⁰ This possibility seems unlikely to me, but it cannot be excluded. In any case, the fact that the Torah-as-liberator/Torah of freedom motif reappears in later rabbinic sources requires explanation. Although the commandments representing the divine law in these sources may differ from those in James, both bear witness to the basic "Torah of freedom pattern." One possible interpretation would be that, even if James did intend to address some intra-Christian tendency he found reproachable, his strategy relied on existing exegetical patterns of broader Jewish circulation. The epistle would then be our earliest witness for a motif otherwise attested only in later rabbinic sources. Another possibility would be that both James and later the rabbis were responding here to Pauline-type ideas coming from within the Christian movement. This solution presupposes the rejection of Pines's thesis that the early Jewish "liberation theology" responded to ideas widespread in Greco-Roman culture, and proposes, instead, that it was predicated completely on the Christian challenge.⁶¹ This is an intriguing suggestion but, again, in my opinion

⁵⁹ This last feature has prompted some interpreters to suggest that James in his counterattack completely misunderstood Paul. See M. Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (ed. H. Koester; trans. M. A. Williams; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 79–80; F. Hahn, "Genesis 15:6 im Neuen Testament," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie: Gerhard von Rad zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. H. W. Wolff; Munich; Kaiser, 1971), 97; Bartlett, "The Epistle of James," 178.

⁶⁰ See Bartlett, *ibid.* and n. 12 there.

⁶¹ An illuminating example of the presentation of some rabbinic developments as conditioned by Christian challenges may be found in I. Yuval, "Easter and Passover as Early Jewish-Christian Dialogue," in *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times* (eds. P. E. Bradshaw and L. A. Hoffman; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 98–124.

not very probable. Yet even if such a possibility is considered, the Epistle of James retains its importance as the first witness for a *long Jewish exegetical trajectory*, albeit in this case one engendered by Paul.

Abraham as Model of the Observant Believer

In his argument favoring deeds as necessary for the validation of faith, the author of James invokes the example of Abraham, linking Gen 15:6 to the offering of Isaac in Gen 22:⁶²

(21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered⁶³ his son Isaac upon the altar? (22) You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, (23) and the scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it [his deed] was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6); and he was called the friend of God. (24) You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. (Jas 2:21–24)

This invocation of Abraham has often been interpreted as meant to oppose Pauline ideas expressed, inter alia, in Rom 4:2–12 (cf. Gal 3:6):⁶⁴

(4:2) For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (3) For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” . . . (6) So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works. . . . (9) Is this blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. (10) How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was

⁶² In Jas 2:25–26, Rahab is mentioned as an additional example of faith expressed in deeds. For a discussion, see Bartlett, “The Epistle of James,” 176–78.

⁶³ The word used here (*ἀνενέγκας*) has prompted some interpreters to suggest that the author of the epistle might have been aware of the exegetical tradition claiming that Abraham did actually offer Isaac as a sacrificial lamb.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Bartlett, “The Epistle of James,” 175; and Niehoff, “Implied Audience,” 67–68.

circumcised. (11) He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, (12) and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

To my mind, however, some internal features of the Jas 2:21–24 argument indicate that the author of the epistle was not at all “locked into” the specifics of Paul’s polemic as reflected in Romans and Galatians. The whole issue of Gentile members of the Jesus movement and Paul’s argument against their obligation to undergo circumcision—the central theme of the Pauline passages in question—appears nowhere in James. The example of Abraham’s deed-centered righteousness is employed here to promote the same basic demands of the Torah which are derived from the love-your-neighbor precept discussed above—nothing like the ritual demands of Judaism that Paul did not want Gentile believers to embrace. Correspondingly, circumcision does not feature in the description of Abraham’s righteous behavior (“deeds”), being substituted—as the “seal of righteousness”—by the offering of Isaac. In other words, it is not the Gen 15–Gen 17 polemical Pauline trajectory (faith/circumcision) that is elaborated here but rather that of Gen 15–Gen 22 (faith/Akedah).

These internal indications weaken the probability that James’s statement on Abraham is a polemical anti-Pauline move, but they do not completely annul the validity of such an evaluation. As in the cases discussed above, it is possible in principle that James dealt here—albeit in a different setting—with some distant “aftershocks” of Paul’s influence. Yet again, the fact that James, unlike Paul, applies the reasoning from Abraham’s example neither to Christology nor to the Gentile conundrum, but rather to a general topic of Jewish exegetic discourse—the core principles of the Torah and the specific precepts of behavior derived from them—needs to be accounted for. It is thus imperative to check the epistle’s possible points of reference in that discourse.⁶⁵ In other words, even without reaching a definite conclusion on the question of whether or not the author was acquainted with and troubled by certain elements

⁶⁵ For an analogous approach to some Pauline traditions, see discussion in M. Kister, “Romans 5:12–21 against the Background of Torah-Theology and Hebrew Usage,” *HTR* 100/4 (2007): 391–424.

of Pauline thought, one may still examine the epistle's value as a witness to existing and developing broader patterns of Jewish exegesis.

Second Temple and early rabbinic sources testify to a clearly apologetic trend that aims to present Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation, as one who had fulfilled Torah obligations long before they were revealed to the people of Israel on Sinai. Ben Sira 44:19–21 provides a characteristic example:⁶⁶

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory; (20) he kept the law of the Most High, and was taken into covenant with him; he established the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he was found faithful. (21) Therefore the Lord assured him by an oath that the nations would be blessed through his posterity; that he would multiply him like the dust of the earth, and exalt his posterity like the stars, and cause them to inherit from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

The passage combines two important claims regarding Abraham: (1) he kept the Lord's Torah (with reference to Gen 26:5),⁶⁷ and (2) he was found faithful⁶⁸ when he withstood God's test. In *Jubilees*, characteristically, Abraham is portrayed as arranging his rites of thanksgiving along the lines of the sacrificial Torah ordinances and thus inaugurating the Feast of Tabernacles (*Jub.* 16:20–27);⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Cf. *m. Qid.* 4:14.

⁶⁷ “Because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”

⁶⁸ Abraham is described as “faithful” (נאמן) already in Neh 9:8. His faith, highlighted in Gen 15:6, becomes a focus in Philo, *Leg. All.* 3.228 (cf. *Mut. Nom.* 177); *Jub.* 23:10; *b. Meg.* 11a. According to *Mek. R. Ishmael Be-shalah* 3 and 6, it is by virtue of Abraham's faith that he inherited both this world and the world to come and that God parted the sea for his descendants: בוכות אברהם אביהם אני קורע להם את הים... כן את מוצא שלא ירש אברהם אבינו העולם (Gen 15:6).

⁶⁹ “And he built there an altar to the Lord who had delivered him, and who was making him rejoice in the land of his sojourning, and he celebrated a festival of joy in this month seven days, near the altar which he had built at the Well of the Oath. And he built booths for himself and for his servants on this festival, and he was the first to celebrate the feast of tabernacles on the earth. And during these seven days he brought each day to the altar a burnt offering to the Lord, two oxen, two rams, seven sheep, one he-goat, for a sin offering, that he might atone thereby for himself and for his seed. And, as a thank-offering, seven rams, seven kids, seven sheep, and seven he-goats, and their fruit offerings

moreover, even the Akedah of the Genesis narrative is transformed here into the foundational event of the observance of the Passover festival (*Jub.* 17:15; 18:3).⁷⁰ In *Jubilees* 17:15–18, Abraham is also described as faithful when tested.⁷¹ The appellation “faithful”—seemingly an interpretation of Abraham as a man of faith, as stated in Gen 15:6—turns Abraham into a forerunner of Moses, the recipient of the Torah, whom God called “נאמן, faithful.”⁷² Deeds are presented in Ben Sira as the true expression/seal of faith, and the “test” clearly refers to the story of the offering of Isaac, which opens in the Bible with the key phrase, “After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’” (Gen 22:1).⁷³

One may note parenthetically that the epistle (unlike Rom 1:17, Gal 3:11, and Heb 10:38) does not employ the verse from Hab 2:4 (צדיק באמונתו יחיה), which can be rendered in English as either, “He who through faith is righteous will live,” or “The righteous will live through (thanks to) his faith.” In Qumran, the former interpretation is clearly preferred:

(7:14) See, it is conceited and does not give way (15) [. . . his soul within him]. *Blank* Its interpretation: they will double

and their drink offerings; and he burnt all the fat thereof on the altar, a chosen offering unto the Lord for a sweet smelling savour. And morning and evening he burnt fragrant substances, frankincense and galbanum, and stackte, and nard, and myrrh, and spice, and costum; all these seven he offered, crushed, mixed together in equal parts (and) pure. And he celebrated this feast during seven days, rejoicing with all his heart and with all his soul, he and all those who were in his house. . . . And he blessed his Creator. . . . And he blessed and rejoiced, and he called the name of this festival the festival of the Lord, a joy acceptable to the Most High God.”

⁷⁰ “And it came to pass in the seventh week, in the first year thereof, in the first month in this jubilee, on the twelfth of this month. . . . And he went to the place on the third day, and he saw the place afar off.”

⁷¹ Cf. *Jub.* 16:18; see also 1 Macc 2:52; 4QPseudo-Jubilees^b [4Q226] 7:1; Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.223 and 233–234. See Bartlett, “The Epistle of James,” 174–75. I am also indebted here to Joshua Tilton; see J. N. Tilton, “The Approval of Abraham in Early Jewish and Christian Sources,” *Jerusalem Perspective* 2007 (March): www.jerusalemerspective.com/3843/ [accessed January 7, 2014].

⁷² Num 12:7. Moses is the only person to whom the Pentateuch applies the term.

⁷³ Cf. Philo, *Abr.* 192, who, while likewise emphasizing Abraham’s faithfulness to the commandments, interprets the Akedah in a strictly allegorical way. For discussion of the Israel forefathers’ representation in Philo, see M. Böhm, *Rezeption und Funktion der Vätererzählungen bei Philo von Alexandria: Zum Zusammenhang von Kontext, Hermeneutik und Exegese im Frühen Judentum* (BZNW 128; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005).

upon them (16) [. . . and] find [no] mercy at being judged. [. . .] (17) [. . . (Hab 2:4b) *But he who through faith is righteous will live.* (8:1) Its interpretation concerns all observing the Law in the House of Judah, whom (2) God will free from punishment on account of their deeds and of their faithfulness (3) to the Teacher of Righteousness. (1QpHab 7:14–8:2)⁷⁴

Faith is thus presented as the underlying principle of Torah observance.⁷⁵ As a matter of fact, apart from the specific issue of ritual precepts, the same is true with regard to early Christian usage. In addition to the New Testament instances mentioned above, 1 Clement 31:2 also points to such an interpretation: “Why was our father Abraham blessed? Was it not because he wrought righteousness and truth through faith?” Alternatively, *Mekilta de R. Ishmael* attests to a combination of the notion that if a person, out of faith, fulfills even a single commandment, he is worthy to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,⁷⁶ with a complementary motif: as a reward for his unwavering faith in God’s salvation in this world of darkness, he will inherit both this world and the world to come. Abraham is singled out in the *Mekilta* as exemplifying the latter kind of faith, with Gen 15:6 quoted as the proof-text.⁷⁷ It turns out that the faith mentioned in Hab 2:4 is generally perceived in our sources as either belief in salvation or as the right inner stance underlying the fulfillment of commandments. Of course, the two notions are not necessarily unrelated.

To return to the patterns emphasized in Ben Sira, Abraham’s trial/temptation is midrashically expanded in the Mishnah into the motif of ten trials, where the offering of Isaac seemingly provides the culmination.⁷⁸ On the

⁷⁴ Cf. 1QH^a 8:24–26: “(24) And you, you are [a lenient] and compassionate [God,] slow to anger, full of favor and of truth, who forgives sin [] (25) and has pity on the [evil of those who love you] and keep your precepts, those who turn to you with faith (באמונה) and a perfect heart [] (26) to serve you [and to do what] is good in your eyes.” The English translation of Qumranic material in this paper follows W. G. E. Watson in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (Electronic Library ed. by F. García Martínez; Leiden: Brill, 1994).

⁷⁵ See also 1QH^a 8:24–26, which stresses the same idea without reference to the verse from Habakkuk; and cf. *b. Mak.* 24a.

⁷⁶ See *Mek. de-R. Ishmael Be-shalah* 6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; cf. *Mek. de-R. Shimon b. Yoḥai* 14.

⁷⁸ See *m. Avot* 5:3. For a discussion of the Akedah narrative perception and function in antiquity, see L. Kundert, *Die Opferung/Bindung Isaaks* (2 vols.; WMANT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1998).

other hand, *Jubilees* 17:15–18 already attests to the explicit exegetical link between Gen 15:6 (Abraham’s faith) and Gen 22 (his trials and afflictions):

And it came to pass in the seventh week, in its first year, in the first month in that jubilee, on the twelfth of that month, that words came in heaven concerning Abraham that he was faithful in everything that was told him and he loved the Lord and was faithful in all affliction(s). And Prince Mastema came and he said before God, “Behold, Abraham loves Isaac his son. And he is more pleased with him than everything. Tell him to offer him (as) a burnt-offering upon the altar. And you will see whether he will do this thing. And you will know whether he is faithful in everything in which you test him.” And the Lord was aware that Abraham was faithful in all his afflictions. . . . And in everything in which he tested him, he was found faithful. And his soul was not impatient. And he was not slow to act because he was faithful and a lover of the Lord.⁷⁹

This exegetical link, presenting Abraham’s ability to withstand the trial of offering up his son as conditioned on his faith mentioned in Gen 15, would be further elaborated as witnessed by the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:17–19): “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. . . . He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

Jubilees, furthermore, attests to the early presence of another motif (also found in Philo⁸⁰) highlighting Abraham as the one who established faith in the one God in Israel:

And it came to pass in the sixth week, in the seventh year, that Abram spoke to Terah his father, saying, “O father!” 2 And he said, “Behold, here I am, my son.” And he said: “What help or advantage do we have from these idols before which you worship and bow down? 3 Because there is not any spirit in them, for they are mute, and they are the misleading of the

⁷⁹ English quote is according to R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913).

⁸⁰ For Philo’s position, see Niehoff, “The Implied Audience,” n. 33 and the discussion there.

heart. Do not worship them. 4 Worship the God of heaven, who sends down rain and dew upon the earth, and who makes everything upon the earth, and created everything by his word, and all life is in his presence. 5 Why do you worship those who have no spirit in them? Because they are works of the hands, you are carrying them upon your shoulders, and there is no help from them for you, except great shame for those who made them and the misleading of the heart for those who worship them. Do not worship them.” (*Jub* 12:1–5)

Reinvoking this motif, a Targumic tradition on Gen 49:1–2 that seems to go back to pre-Christian times intrinsically links that faith with deeds, as proclaimed in Deut 6:4–5. Portraying Abraham as the true founder of “monotheistic belief” (in connection with Gen 15?), the Targum also claims that this belief was later successfully transmitted from generation to generation to all of Jacob’s sons—notwithstanding intermittent failures, such as Ishmael and Esau:

After the twelve tribes of Jacob had gathered together and surrounded the bed of gold on which our father Jacob were lying, they were hoping that he would reveal to them the order of the blessings, but it was hidden from him. Our father Jacob answered and said to them: “From Abraham, my father’s father, was born the blemished Ishmael and all the sons of Keturah. And from Isaac, my father, was born the blemished Esau, my brother. And I fear lest there should be among you one whose heart is divided against his brothers to go and worship before foreign idols.” The twelve sons of Jacob answered together and said: “Hear us, O Israel, our father; the Lord our God is one Lord.” Jacob answered [and blessed them, each according to his good works] and said: “Blessed be his name; may the glory of his kingdom be for ever and ever.”⁸¹

⁸¹ *Tg. Neof.* to Gen 49:1–2; cf. *Exod. Rab.* 23:5. See discussion in G. Di Luccio, “An Examination of the Synoptic Problem in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew in Light of the Aramaic Targums to the Pentateuch” (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006), 25–30.

Abraham as the Beloved of God (φίλος θεοῦ), and the Akedah

While we have seen that already in *Jubilees* Abraham was presented as the founder of the monotheistic faith, we have noted that in the early Targumic tradition this long-standing motif is further elaborated, with Deut 6:4–5 explicitly singled out as the expression of that faith. Since the passage from Deut establishes an intrinsic link between the faith in one God and the commandment to love him “with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul and with all one’s might,” the portrayal of Abraham as the one who truly loves God is only natural. This portrayal is found in *Jubilees* 17 (quoted above) and is widely attested in rabbinic tradition, inter alia, explicitly in connection to Abraham’s trials, most prominently the Akedah. Thus already in the Mishnah we read: “With ten temptations was Abraham our father tempted, and he stood steadfast in them all, to show how great was the love of Abraham our father.”⁸² It is thus no wonder that scholars have perceived the application of the appellation “the friend of God/one who loves God” (φίλος θεοῦ) to Abraham in Jas 2:23 as being “within tradition.”⁸³ The traditional connection of trials to faith and to love is likewise highlighted in Jas 1:2–8, 12.

In later rabbinic sources, a variation of the same pattern is found, where Abraham is defined as typifying a “Pharisee of love.” Thus in *y. Sotah* 5.5 [20c] we read:⁸⁴

One verse of Scripture says, “And you shall love the Lord your God” (Deut 6:5). And another verse of Scripture says, “You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him” (Deut 6:13). . . . “A Pharisee-out-of-fear,” like Job. “A Pharisee-out-of-love,” like Abraham. And the only one of them all who is truly beloved is the Pharisee-out-of-love, like Abraham. Abraham made the impulse to do evil into good. What is the Scriptural basis for that statement? “And thou didst find his heart faithful before thee” (Neh 9:8). . . . R. Aqiba was on trial before Tonosteropos [Turnus Rufus] the Wicked. The time for

⁸² *M. Avot* 5:3; see n. 78 above.; trans. H. Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933). The command to love God in Deut 6:5 is interpreted in *m. Ber.* 9:5 as intrinsically connected to the readiness to stand steadfast in trials, albeit without mentioning Abraham; see n. 51 above.

⁸³ See Sigal, “The Halakhah of James,” 347–48, who quotes Philo (*Abr.* 31 [170] and 45 [262]), *Jub.* 19:9, etc., as precedents.

⁸⁴ Cf. *y. Ber.* 9.5 [14b]; *b. Sotah* 22b; *t. Sotah* 22b.

reciting the Shema came. He began to recite it and smiled. [The wicked one] said to him, “Old man, old man! You are either a wizard or you have contempt for pain [that you smile].” He said to him . . . “For my whole life I have been reciting this verse: ‘And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deut 5:6). I loved God with all my heart, and I loved him with all my might. But *with all my soul* until now was not demanded of me. And now that the time has come for me to love him with all my soul, as the time for reciting the Shema has arrived, I smile that the occasion has come to carry out the verse at that very moment at which I recite the Scripture.”

According to this tradition, Abraham is the prototype of a “Pharisee-of-love.” For him, the fulfillment of the commandments is associated with the right disposition of the heart and complete trust in God—even in the face of imminent martyrdom. The parallel to R. Akiva’s “loving suffering” indicates that the fundamental connection to Abraham’s tests and trials, most prominently the Akedah, is also made here, as in the Mishnaic passage quoted earlier.

It may be observed that the Epistle of James, occupying with regard to its dating a position midway between Second Temple and rabbinic sources, collates most of the Abraham-centered motifs found before and/or after its time in the broader Jewish tradition. The only substantial component of the above thematic elements that is absent from the epistle (and indeed from the whole early spectrum of surviving Jewish writings) is the “Pharisee-of-love” motif. The epistle thus becomes an important witness for the history of this cluster of exegetical patterns.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Epistle of James suggested in this paper exemplifies the insights that can be gleaned from viewing its exegetical strategies within the context of contemporaneous Jewish concerns. In fact, even if the question of the epistle’s setting, including the possible context of an anti-Pauline sentiment within the Jesus movement, should remain undecided, such a reframing has compelled a reevaluation of the letter and its objectives. The passages discussed here lack unambiguous indications of the above sentiment, and I am therefore inclined to see them as primarily addressing exegetical patterns of broader Jewish circulation. However, even if the solution of intra-Christian polemic is

preferred, it appears that James might have “grafted” existing motifs—while reworking them—into his exegetical design, as conditioned by the particular polemical situation. If these motifs can be isolated, they will provide evidence for certain general trajectories in the development of Jewish exegesis. Such input should be especially anticipated when the New Testament traditions in question are devoid of a Christological agenda.⁸⁵

Two exegetical motifs, conspicuous in the first two chapters of the epistle, were chosen as test cases: (1) Torah as the “perfect royal law of freedom,” and (2) Abraham as an outstanding example of a righteous man whose faith is expressed in the *deed* of the Akedah. In both cases, James’s reasoning seems detached from Christological or explicitly eschatological concerns; and as noted, neither can any clearly polemical link to Paul’s ideas be discerned here. I have discussed relevant exegetical patterns from Second Temple Jewish writings, as well as traditions attested in rabbinic, mainly Palestinian, sources. With regard to the “royal” designation of the Torah and the perception of the Torah as the true liberator, I have pointed out a topical proximity to certain tendencies in rabbinic thought, which suggests that the epistle may be an early witness to an exegetical trajectory already existing in its day but otherwise attested only from the time of the Mishnah.

In its portrayal of Abraham, the epistle collates most of the motifs used by a variety of texts, of both Second Temple and rabbinic provenance, to cast the patriarch as the prototype of the truly just man, whose faith in and love of the One God find their expression in the ultimate deed—his readiness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. On the other hand, the epistle does not introduce here any peculiar Jesus-centered sub-motifs unattested in these other sources. Together with the Targum, the Epistle of James provides important evidence for an early exegetical linkage between Abraham’s belief as expressed in Gen 15:6 and the expression of God’s unity in Deut 6:4.

The impressive “piling on” of various motifs may be seen as characteristic of the epistle’s composition. It should be emphasized, however, that in James the “collage” of exegetical motifs is mobilized to promote the fulfillment of commandments derived from Lev 19:18—with no eschatological/messianic reevaluation of their meaning. Even if the author of the epistle did react to some distant offshoots of Pauline ideas, in his response he seems to have relied completely on existing exegetical patterns of broader Jewish circulation and may thus be seen as a key witness to their early history.

⁸⁵ But see Niehoff, “The Implied Audience of the Letter of James,” for a different take on the lack of Christological agenda.

A comparison with the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls is instructive here. Scholars have aspired to develop methods that would make it possible to distinguish—even *within* an individual scroll—between belief patterns characteristic of the group that produced the text and those shared with “wider Judaism.” Thus the scrolls, remaining the most important source for the study of the peculiar phenomenon of Second Temple Jewry they seem to represent, are also recognized as a crucial resource for achieving better understanding of some characteristic Jewish trends of broader circulation. This important insight invites a parallel critical reassessment of the “witness value” of the traditions formed within the nascent Jesus movement. Whereas some of the motifs found in the texts produced within this movement clearly represent its peculiar outlook, others may possibly reflect Jewish religious patterns of broader circulation.